

THE ITALIAN PEASANT.

The condition of the Italian peasant is in some respects worse, and in many respects better, than that of his English brother. He has a better soil and a better climate, to begin with; fewer wants, and a greater capacity for enjoying life. He is often a poor man, but seldom a pauper, in the legal sense of the word. His appearance in England and elsewhere as an organ-grinder is not a result of poverty, but of a desire to escape from the conscription, or to elude the laws of his native country, which are very severe in certain cases, though much milder than they were a few years ago. Most of these vagabonds have run away from home, leaving behind them parents or families who are respectable; or, if young, have been sold or "farmed out" to master organ-grinders, with or without their parents' consent, at so much a head, or in gangs of six or eight, like convicts. It is quite a mistake to suppose that these wanderers are the outpourings of the Italian streets. They are generally vagrants and beggars—perhaps criminals—because they have come to England. In their own country they have the means of subsistence. Many of the organ-grinders of London are peasants from the mountain districts of Italy. They speak a language of their own—a patois made up of the waifs and strays of various dialects—a kind of Babel of sounds which would be unintelligible in the cities and large towns of their native land. Most of the image men are Tuscans, or inhabitants of Lucca and Modena. The hurdy-gurdy boys are Savoyards and Piedmontese. The Pifferari, or Italian pipers, some of whom have bagpipes like the Scotch Highlanders, and Calabrian fiddlers, but in some instances a Roman or Tuscan minstrel is to be found in the streets of London dancing a jig or singing a plaintive song in pure Italian. Most of these adventurers live and vegetate in the dark courts and alleys of Clerkenwell and Soho square—haunts of vice and misery, where Italy may look for her exiled children any day in the year, and claim them, too, if she have a mind (which she has not), together with all the organ-grinders or others who infest the metropolis. One and all are peasants, or relatives and friends of peasants; people who began life as farmers or farm servants in the fertile valleys and lands—landed proprietors of fields and cabbage gardens. The peasantry of Italy may be divided into two great classes: the contadini and the peasant, or the upper and lower classes of peasants. The cultivators of the soil are an independent race. They are the fellow-laborers of the ox, but they are not ploughmen or peasants in the English sense of the word. They associate with dogs, horses, and sheep; but they are their own masters. They are the children of nature. They claim themselves the citizens of the woods. They are proud and arrogant at the same time. They have a flower's right to grow on their native heath, a lark's privilege to sing in the fields. They are as much a part of the landscape as the trees themselves. Their defect is that they take root. You may cut them down, or they will die in their places, as their fathers did before them; but you cannot induce them to leave the country, unless it be for criminal or political reasons. Let us take a glance at the English peasant, and compare his qualities—good, bad, or indifferent—with those of the Italian contadino. We all know the defects of the English swain; now rude he is, how unskillful, how unable to compete with mechanics in the race for wealth. In nine cases out of ten he is a drudge, a thing, and not a man, part of the machinery of a farm-house; in some cases a pauper, and in others a slave—if people can be called slaves who have the right to die of starvation and the liberty to go to the workhouse! But, in spite of his defects, and the defects of his position, he is a more substantial being than his Italian prototype. He has greater powers of endurance, and endures with a better grace. He is thankful for small mercies; he works and plays with a will; and he starves in a good-humored sort of way, as if he thought his time were come. But send him abroad, put him on his own land in a new country, give him in Australia or America the chances which an Italian peasant has at home, and ten to one he will prosper, and bring about, or help to bring about, the prosperity of others. For the English workman is never more at home than when he is abroad. He knows that he is a man as well as an Englishman; and that the earth, not of a part of it, is a native of the earth, whose possession is his never-sleeping servant. He may send his wife and children out to beg, or become a beggar himself when work is slack and the winter harvest—that of the chestnut-tree—has been gathered in, but he has always a roof to cover him, a household fire from which no landlord can expel him, a hut which he has inherited with his name, and which is as much a part of his identity as the shell of his body. The contadini of the North of Italy make, as a rule, very good farmers. They are more industrious than the peasants of Naples, and better educated than the men who work in the fields and vineyards of Tuscany; but they are not so refined as the latter, and they speak Italian as people speak a language they have acquired by study. To them the language of Tuscany—the national speech of Italy—is a foreign tongue. They learn it—they do not inherit it; they are Italy's foster-children. Thus it comes to pass that they are obliged to become scholars, or at least the pupils of a schoolmaster, before they can put themselves into communication with the authorities. Their local speech is not recognized by the law. Sermons are preached, proclamations are issued, lawsuits are carried on, in a language which is as strange to them as the English language used to be to the inhabitants of the interior of Wales. Nor is this the case solely with the peasantry; the middle and even the upper classes are sadly at a loss sometimes to express themselves in proper language, so that they are often compelled to speak a foreign tongue (say French or German), in order to make themselves understood in polite society. French is becoming quite the rage in Lombardy and Venetia, where ladies and gentlemen of good position do not scruple to speak bad French in preference to good Italian; perhaps because they fear that provincial accent will slip out. I have said that the peasants of the North of Italy speak patois; but when they read and write (as they often do) they

read and write Italian, and not Piedmontese, or lingua Lombarda. This is the sense in which the northern peasantry are better educated than those of the midland provinces, though, according to all accounts, they are less nobly gifted by nature, and spring from "barbarians," and not from the ancient Romans: some say from the Goths and Vandals. The peasants of Tuscany pride themselves on having a gentler pedigree. Their patois is the language of scholars. Dante wrote in it, Galileo thought in it, Italy is governed by it at the present day. The shepherd-boy who tends his flocks on the mountains of the Val d'Arno and knows nothing of books except that they have been forbidden by the priest, talks more correctly and pronounces his words better than the average Lombard gentleman. He can improvise poetry, or, I should say, poetical phrases, better than a lawyer can defend his client, or a doctor talk to his sick man, in many of the northern towns. Nay, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the lower classes of Tuscany are born with the purple of literature, just as the birds of the forest are born songsters. They talk correctly as the fish swim properly; as fire burns with a due regard to the rules of chemistry without knowing them; as leaves fall to the ground in obedience to the law of gravitation. You may find peasants and charcoal-burners in the midland provinces of Italy whose knowledge of the Divina Comedy and the Two Orlando (Orlando Furioso and Orlando Innamorato) is as profound as that of an Italian litterato; and they may be confederate, for while the latter has often a large library to fall back upon, the peasant is confined to his ancient epic; the books he has learnt by tradition, as a child learns fairy tales, by word of mouth and memory, and not by book or pen, though now and then his natural powers are eked out by a little learning. The majority of the peasants are, of course, ignorant of these chefs-d'œuvre, and those who can read by the card do not always read poetry: the Beati Di Francia, the story of Bertoldo and Bertoldino (a kind of prose epic), and the legends and histories of the saints, being among their favorite books. The Italian peasantry contribute very largely to the military resources of the country. They supply the great bulk of the soldiers; they are the raw material which the Italian Government employs to fight its battles and defend its frontiers; in others in some cases into heroes, and in others into powder machines—warranted, gun in hand, to go off at a moment's notice. Do not let it be supposed, however, that these sons of the soil are exceptionally brave and warlike; that they take a particular delight in fighting, or in achieving military glory. They are simply poor (poor at least in ready money), and they buy themselves off from the government. If soldiering were a matter of choice, it is doubtful whether the king would receive as many recruits from the peasantry as would suffice to equip a single regiment. The contadini are a peaceful race: docile and patient to a fault; capable of great acts of self-denial, but not addicted to rebellion or to political or social risings, either in defense of a right or in revenge for a wrong; a very different class of men to the peasantry of Kent and the bluff yeomanry of Yorkshire. The Italian contadino enters the army because they are obliged to do so. Every strong and hoary lad, whether he be peer or peasant, is liable to be claimed by the conscription as soon as he attains his nineteenth year, provided he be not maimed, or below the average height, or proved to be the only support and comfort of a widowed mother. Of course the peer is bought off from the rank and file; he is enabled to enter the army as an officer if he be so inclined, but once the fine is paid he is exempt from the conscription, and his government must look elsewhere for his substitute. The peasantry are thus called into requisition twice over—once for themselves, and once for their fine-paying neighbors. But they reap many advantages from their forced service in the camp; they learn Italian; they become civilized; they go back to their native villages (at the age of twenty-five) with an acquired taste for books and letter-writing, and are looked upon as gentlemen—perhaps as heroes—by their old associates. A considerable number of the non-readers in Italy are good story-tellers and reciters of ballads, and some of them make what is called a good living out of their art. This is particularly the case in the South and in some of the central provinces, where education of a practical kind has (until recently) been much neglected. Where schools flourish, home-philosophy, sometimes called mother-wit, is generally found to be on the decline. Old women lose their importance; old men look to their sons and daughters, and not to the priest, for instruction. No more peasants, brooding over the old classics, make a reputation as local poets; no more village sylvan thunder forth anathemas in blank verse, or call their children, or their children's children, to sleep with such songs as "Litanies and Ave Marias. To find such customs now-a-days you must go to secluded spots, far away from the track of the schoolmaster; to romantic hills and valleys where the priest is still supreme; to villages suspended from the crags like eagles' nests, and supposed (but not proved) to have been built at the breaking up of the Roman empire by feudal chiefs, or robbers, who were making war on their sovereign. It would almost appear as if poetry of a certain class cannot exist in an enlightened age. Try looks best on ruins; ballads do not flourish in an age of newspapers. Perhaps it is because ballads, being in one sense an inferior kind of newspaper, are driven out of the market by the real article. Look at education, what it is doing in Italy; how it is breaking the soil (like a large steam plough), and preparing the country for a new harvest! But in removing the rubbish and obstructions which beset its path, it removes many beautiful things; not alone the weeds of ignorance and superstition, but the wild flowers of tradition and poetry. And these are the sights which one sees in Italy in this year of grace, the harvest of Naples swept away, or forced to become honest members of society; the gondoliers of Venice reformed, and educated, and properly controlled by the authorities; the brigands of Calabria and the Roman States shot or imprisoned as convicts; the pifferari and wandering minstrels—poor peasants, with their wives and families, who used to sing so prettily at the wayside shrines and in front of the pictures of the Virgin Mary—sent to the reformatory or the workhouse. But it is impossible not to regret some of the old customs and traditions which are being destroyed along with these errors and abuses. Tuscany and Lombardy, as well as Naples and the Roman States, contain many of the secluded spots above alluded to, "spots" composed of villages, and even small towns, where newspapers are unknown, books a forbidden rarity, and candles (tallow, wax, and composite) highly esteemed as articles of re-

ligion. The peasantry of these places are still in the sixteenth century. Every man, woman, and child places his and her conscience in the hands of the local priest. Soul money, or a tax on dead people, is levied, and paid with cheerfulness. Taxes are raised on sin, indulgences (or permission to sin) are bought and sold in secret, and people taught that the wages of sin is not death, as stated in the Scriptures, but absolute hell and eternal life. The fact is the Italian peasantry are the great bulwark of the Church of Rome. When these fall off the Pope may begin to despair, but so long as these remain faithful—that is to say, as long as they remain ignorant and superstitious—there will be no prospect of a change of tactics on the part of the priesthood, either as regards soul-money for the dead, or sin-money for the living, or the worship of graven images throughout the length and breadth of the land. Among the most horrible of the superstitions of the peasantry, is the belief in the advocacy of little children—babies, who die as soon as they are baptized, or as soon after baptism as is consistent with a belief in their entire innocence and purity. Children who die young are called "advocates," or advocati, because they are said to go to heaven without passing into purgatory, and plead for their parents and relations at the right hand of God. Many old women (chiefly grandmothers), and not a few fathers and mothers, have been convicted of compassing the deaths of children, not wickedly or maliciously, but in a pious, God-fearing sort of way, in order to have their friends as they are baptized, when their comes. Do not suppose that they murder the children. Nothing of the sort. They simply let them alone and keep the doctor at a distance. If they are ill they say the hand of God is upon them. If friends interpose, and insist on something being done, they mutter a Latin prayer, and resign themselves to what they are pleased to call the "wishes of the Almighty." I have known cases where mothers have prayed that their innocent little children might die during illness, and cried bitterly when the coffin was being carried out of doors. But such cases are rare. The peasantry of Lombardy and Venetia are more prosperous than those of Central Italy. At any rate, they eat and drink more copiously, and are able to afford themselves greater luxuries. They earn more, and they spend more than their southern brothers, and their food is not always coarse and unpalatable. Thus, in the central districts, among the hills of Tuscany, Lucca, and Modena, the contadini eat nothing but necces and potenta, which are the Italian names for chesnut bread and chesnut porridge. A little salt, a little oil of water, and a few handfuls of chesnut flour thrown into a large cauldron (suspended from the inside of the chimney by a chain with a hook to it), form the ingredients of their morning meal. The same mixture, cooked in a different way—baked between two bricks, or rolled up (and boiled) in a towel, like a plum-pudding—serves for a dinner, and provides (in the shape of leavings) for a supper later in the day. The peasantry of the Tuscan Alps rarely, if ever, eat meat, except on Sundays and holidays, taking Friday's allowance of eggs and milk and luxuries, because the poor like to sell them to the rich, and a loaf is considered quite a treat by the children of the peasantry; nay, it is one about which many hard-working people know nothing at all except by hearsay. This state of things would be simply intolerable to the peasantry of the north of Italy. The northern contadino is accustomed to a butcher's meat on six days in the week. 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